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ABSTRACT

The digest addresses ways that parents and educators can nurture giftedness in young children. Problems in appropriate school placement for young gifted children with uneven development are discussed and illustrated with examples. In selecting a program, parents need to look for a highly individualized program in which children are encouraged to progress at their own learning rate, with planned opportunities for development of social, physical, and cognitive skills in an informal classroom atmosphere. Parents also need to support the child's need for friendship with intellectually equal children. Includes six references. (DB)

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NURTURING GIFTEDNESS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Versions of the following conversation can often be heard when young gifted children start school. "Bill doesn't belong in kindergarten!" the parent cries. "Look, he's reading at the fourth grade level and has already learned two-column addition." The teacher or principal, having already decided this is a "pushy parent," replies, "Well, Mrs. Smith, Bill certainly doesn't belong in first grade; he hasn't learned to tie his shoelaces, and he can't hold a pencil properly, and he had a tantrum yesterday in the hall."

The problem in this continuing controversy is that both parties are usually correct. Some gifted children entering kindergarten have acquired academic skills far beyond those of their age mates. Such children master the academic content of kindergarten when they are 3 years old. However, their physical and social development may be similar to that of other 5 year olds, making an accelerated placement a mismatch as well. The usual solution is to place a child like Bill in a program matched to his weaknesses, rather than his strengths. Bill usually ends up in kindergarten, where his advanced intellectual development becomes a frustration to his teacher, an embarrassment to his peers, and a burden to Bill.

Educators justify this placement by saying, "Bill needs socialization; he's already so far ahead academically, he doesn't need anything in that area." There are two major problems with this rationale. First, educators are essentially telling such students that there is no need for them to learn anything in school. The second problem is revealed by examining the so-called socialization experienced by a brilliant 5-year-old like Bill in a kindergarten class of 25 to 30 students. A major component of early socialization involves a child's feeling that she or he is accepted by others—teachers and children alike. If the teacher does not validate a gifted child's advanced abilities and intellectual interests by making them part of the ongoing curriculum, the child experiences no feelings of acceptance from the teacher. If, as is highly likely, this child makes the additional discovery that she or he is quite different from most classmates and that communication is extremely difficult because of differences in vocabulary and modes of expression, then the child misses peer acceptance as well. In fact, this first school experience, which should furnish the impetus for future enthusiasm about learning, can be a dismal failure for the brilliant child in a lockstep kindergarten program. Often these children learn to hide or deny their abilities so as to fit in better with the other children. Or, they may develop behavioral problems or pychosomatic symptoms such as stomachaches and headaches, causing parents to confront the school with justifiable concern.

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Understanding Uneven Development

It is important to remember that these children very often do not develop evenly. In fact, young gifted children frequently show peaks of extraordinary performance rather than equally high skill levels in all cognitive areas. The child who learns to read at age 3 or who shows unusually advanced spatial reasoning ability, for example, may not be the child with the highest IQ or the earliest language development. Unique patterns of development can be observed within a group of gifted children, and uneven development is frequently evident in the pattern of a single child. In some cases, it seems as though children's abilities develop in spurts, guided by changes in interest and opportunity. Reading ability, for example, might develop almost overnight. Children who know all their letters and letter sounds by age 2 1/2 may remain at that level for some time, perhaps until age 4 or 5, and then in a matter of months develop fluent reading skills at the third or fourth grade level.

Another area of unevenness in the development of gifted young children is found in the relationship between advanced intellectual development and development of physical and social skills. Evidence seems to indicate that intellectually gifted children's performance in the physical domain may only be advanced to the extent that the physical tasks involve cognitive organization. And, although intellectually advanced children tend to possess some advanced social-cognitive skills, they do not necessarily demonstrate those skills in their social behavior. In other words, they may understand how to solve social conflicts and interact cooperatively but not know how to translate their understanding into concrete behavior.

It is not uncommon to find gifted young children experiencing a vast gap between their advanced intellectual skills and their less advanced physical and emotional competencies. For example, 4- and 5-year-old children may converse intelligently about abstract concepts such as time and death and read fluently at the fourth grade level, yet find it difficult to hold a pencil or share their toys with others.

Often these uneven developmental levels can lead to extreme frustration, as children find that their limited physical skills are not sufficiently developed to carry out the complex projects they imagined. These children may throw tantrums or even give up on projects without trying. Adult guidance in developing coping strategies can help such children set more realistic goals for themselves and learn how to solve problems effectively when their original efforts do not meet their high expectations.

Adults, too, can be misled by children's advanced verbal ability or reasoning skill into expecting equally advanced behavior in all other areas. It is unsettling to hold a high-level conversation with a 5 year old who then turns around and punches a classmate who stole her pencil. Sometimes young children's age-appropriate social behavior is interpreted as willful or lazy by parents and teachers whose expectations are unrealistically high. The only accurate generalization that can be made about the characteristics of intellectually gifted young children is that they demonstrate their unusual intellectual skills in a wide variety of ways and that they form an extremely heterogeneous group with re-

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spect to interests, skill levels in particular areas, social development, and physical abilities.

Understanding the unique developmental patterns often present in gifted young children can help both parents and teachers adjust their expectations of academic performance to a more reasonable level.

Choosing a Program or School

One of the few psychological truths educators and psychologists agree on is that the most learning occurs when an optimal match between the learner's current understanding and the challenge of new learning material has been carefully engineered. Choosing a program or school for a gifted child who masters ideas and concepts quickly but behaves like a typical 4- or 5-year-old child is indeed a challenge.

Many intellectually gifted children master the cognitive content of most preschool and kindergarten programs quite early. They come to school ready and eager to learn concepts not usually taught until an older age. However, academic tasks designed for older children often require the learner to carry out teacher-directed activities while sitting still and concentrating on written worksheets. Young children, no matter how bright they are, require active involvement with learning materials and often do not have the writing skills required for above-grade-level work.

Since many gifted children will hide their abilities in order to fit in more closely with classmates in a regular program, teachers may not be able to observe advanced intellectual or academic abilities directly. If a kindergartner enters school with fluent reading ability, the parent should share this information at the beginning of the year instead of waiting until the end of the year to complain that the teacher did not find out that the child could read. When parents and teachers pool their observations of a child's skills, they begin to work together to develop appropriate educational options for nurturing those abilities. Parents whose children have some unusual characteristics that will affect their learning needs have an obligation to share that information with educators, just as educators have an obligation to listen carefully to parent concerns.

When the entry level of learners is generally high but extremely diverse, an appropriate program must be highly individualized. Children should be encouraged to progress at their own learning rate, which will result in most cases in subject matter acceleration. The program should be broadly based, with planned opportunities for development of social, physical, and cognitive skills in the informal atmosphere of an early childhood classroom.

One primary task of teachers is to make appropriately advanced content accessible to young children, taking into account individual social and physical skills. Lessons can be broken into short units, activities presented as games, and many concepts taught through inquiry-oriented dialogue and experimentation with manipulatable materials. Language experience activities in reading and the use of manipulatable mathematics materials, as described in products such as *Mathematics Their Way* (Baratta-Lorton, 1976), are good examples of appropriate curriculum approaches.

An appropriate learning environment should also offer a gifted young child the opportunity to discover true peers at an early age. Parents of gifted children frequently find that, while their child can get along with other children in the neighborhood, an intense friendship is likely to develop with a more developmentally equal peer met in a special class or interest-based activity. Such parents may be dismayed to discover that this best friend does not live next door but across town, and they may wonder whether or not to give in to their child's pleas for inconvenient visits. Probably one of the most supportive activities a parent can engage in is to help a child find a true friend and make the effort required to permit the friendship to flower.

In looking for an appropriate program for their gifted preschooler, then, parents must be aware of the learning needs of young children and not be misled by so-called experts who advocate rigid academic approaches with an emphasis on rote memorization and repetition. Rather, wise parents will look for open-endedness, flexible grouping, and opportunities for advanced activities in a program that allows their child to learn in the company of intellectual peers.

Resources

Allen, R. V., & Allen, C. (1970). *Language experiences in reading* (Vols.1 & 2). Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Press.

Baratta-Lorton, M. (1976). *Mathematics their way: An activity center mathematics program for early childhood education.* Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.

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Spivack, G., & Shure, M. B. (1974). *Social adjustment of young children.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Additional Reading

Smutny, J. F., Veenker, K., & Veenker, S. (1989). *Your gifted child: How to recognize and develop the special talents in your child from birth to age seven.* A practical sourcebook containing a wealth of information for parents and educators of young gifted children. Leads parents through infancy and early childhood, discussing topics such as language development, creativity, and how to choose schools. Provides a developmental checklist. New York: Facts On File.

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